

Strategic Plan 2025 - Plan 2030

Promoting, building, advocating: Championing the future of volunteering in NI

www.volunteernow.co.uk

INTRODUCTION - VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is freely giving unpaid time and skills to benefit others, beyond close friends or relatives. Volunteers come in all shapes and sizes, genders, ages (children, young people, families, employees, older people), backgrounds, cultures, abilities/disabilities, etc.

People volunteer for many reasons, both altruistic and for personal benefit – to both give and get back. The reasons are different for each person but include:

- To give something back;
- To change things for the better;
- To help improve their own community (area or community of interest);
- To use their experience, skills and knowledge for the benefit of others;
- To improve their own health and wellbeing;
- To make friends and be part of a supportive community;
- To learn and develop;
- To improve their employment prospects;
- To give meaning and structure to their lives;
- To improve the governance of an organisation;
- To have fun.

Volunteering also has substantial benefits for the wider community, through the provision of a range of services, reduced social isolation, better community resilience and more active and engaged citizens.

There is a very wide range of kinds of volunteering. What suits one person may not suit the next person, and these choices will change over time as circumstances change. It can be one-off, for a major event, for example, occasional, or regular. It can be highly organised or quite informal. It can vary from giving just an hour, for a one-off activity to a regular weekly commitment of a day, or half a day.

Volunteering can take place in many different kinds of settings, including:

- Sport and fitness
- Health and wellbeing
- Education
- Befriending
- Social care
- Environmental
- Advice-giving
- Fundraising
- Transport driving
- Arts, culture and heritage
- Inclusion and cultural diversity
- Uniformed organisations
- Faith-based
- Youth groups/clubs

- Parent and toddler groups
- Large-scale one-off events
- Virtual online at home
- Campaigning for a cause
- Local community/neighbourhood
- Small-scale 'turn up and take part' activities
- Employer Supported Volunteering (individual or team)
- Governance on a board or committee



Benefits of volunteering

The evidence from extensive research, and the experience of Volunteer Now's own volunteers and that of its members, is that volunteering can bring a wide range of benefits to volunteers, including:

- Improved happiness/life satisfaction;
- Improved quality of life;
- Improved mental health;
- Improved skills, knowledge and experience for employment;
- Increased sense of purpose and meaning in life;
- Increased physical activity and improved physical health;
- Social connectedness and sense of belonging/sense of community;
- Increased self-efficacy (agency) a person's belief in their ability to achieve different outcomes according to their actions.

Principles of volunteering

The following are some of the principles that underpin meaningful high-quality volunteering. It:

- is freely chosen;
- is without material reward (but does not leave volunteers out-of-pocket);
- is safe:
- uses one's skills, knowledge and experience to help others;
- provides opportunities to learn and develop;
- ensures volunteers are supported, valued and recognised;
- gives volunteers a voice in decisions that affect them;
- provides roles that are meaningful, inclusive and accessible;
- does not replace paid staff roles.

BACKGROUND - VOLUNTEER NOW

Volunteer Now is the regional infrastructure organisation for promoting and supporting volunteering across Northern Ireland. It builds recognition for volunteering and celebrates the contribution volunteers make. It provides access to opportunities and encourages people to volunteer. It is the leading resource for volunteer-involving organisations, providing support and advice on recruiting and involving volunteers, governance and safeguarding.

Volunteer Now's work has only been possible with the support of the Department for Communities' RISP programme and other funders and partners.

Volunteer Now is a member of IAVE's Global Network of Volunteering Leadership, the UK Volunteering Forum as well as various regional, national and European networks. We work in partnership with Volunteer Ireland to deliver the Institute of Volunteer Leadership, a network of volunteer managers on the island of Ireland.

Volunteer Now works in partnership with an increasing number of organisations across the voluntary and community, public and private sectors.



Volunteer Now roles

Volunteer Now operates at several different levels:

- At a strategic level, promoting volunteering in Northern Ireland and being the voice of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations to government and other decisionmakers, and working in collaboration with other infrastructure organisations and statutory bodies.
- At an intermediate level, as the lead regional infrastructure body, supporting and building the capacity of more than 700 volunteer-involving organisations in Northern Ireland, promoting volunteering opportunities to potential volunteers, collaborating with other local voluntary and community sector support bodies, and promoting best practice in safeguarding.
- At an operational level, role-modelling best practice as a volunteer-involving organisation itself and in collaboration with a range of partners.

Volunteer Now services and programmes

Volunteer Now has 33 staff who are either based in one of Volunteer Now premises in Belfast, Newry and Enniskillen or in one of our shared bases. Volunteer Now operates hybrid and flexible working policies to support our staff and their ability to meet the needs of our members. Services and programmes include the following:

Volunteers: Volunteer Now promotes volunteering to individuals and groups throughout Northern Ireland, providing access to a wide range of opportunities, through its online platform, social media, local volunteer opportunity sheets, etc.

Organisations: Volunteer Now supports volunteer-involving organisations through the provision of training, promoting volunteering opportunities, promoting standards, support with safeguarding, access to publications, etc.

Community Projects: Volunteer Now delivers a volunteer driving scheme for looked after children in North Down and Ards. We support a network of volunteer-led older persons groups and forums in Belfast, including West Belfast 50+ Forum; Greater Shankill Senior Citizens Forum and the G6. We provide volunteer-led services for isolated older people that include befriending, driving and shopping support services.

Events: The Volunteer Now Events Team has worked on a range of local and international events providing the recruitment, training and management of volunteers. It is very conscious to role-model best practice in volunteering in its own projects and deliver the requirements of our partners and funders.

Training: Volunteer Now provides a range of courses on volunteer management, safeguarding and youth volunteering topics. We also provide tailored training options to suit the particular needs of organisations.

Standards: Volunteer Now has led in promoting high standards in the recruitment, management, and engagement of volunteers in Northern Ireland through Investing in Volunteers and the Volunteer Friendly health-checks.

Governance: Volunteer Now has played a key role in the developing of Good Governance standards for voluntary and community organisations through the Developing Governance Group. It also provides training, support and advice for volunteer involving organisations to improve their governance.

Young people: Volunteer Now supports young people to get involved in volunteering, social action and activism. It supports organisations who want to involve young people as



volunteers. Young people are recognised through the Volunteer Now Impact Awards and involved in our decision making through the Youth Advisory Partnership.

Employer-Supported Volunteering: Each year Volunteer Now supports employers to enable their employees to volunteer, either as a team or individually.

Research and Policy: Volunteer Now has played an important role in commissioning or partnering in research to increase our understanding of volunteering in Northern Ireland and to influence public policy.

Publications: Volunteer Now has a range of useful free publications to download.

CHANGING EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Like all volunteer-involving organisations, Volunteer Now is continuing to face a challenging external environment. Some of these challenges are highlighted below:

- A decline in the number of people willing to volunteer post-Covid-19 because of:
 - Increases in the age that people can retire reducing their availability to volunteer.
 - People work longer hours and often 2 or 3 jobs due to the cost of living
 - The cost of childcare and increasing caring responsibilities
 - The increasing number of people with mental health, wellbeing and neurodiversity challenges.
 - An increasing reluctance to make major and/or long-term commitments.
- An increasing ageing population bringing an increased need for services such as befriending and older people's social groups.
- Severely constrained public sector finances directly affecting Volunteer Now and volunteer-involving organisations.
- The withdrawal of various statutory services due to difficulties with the public finances, and expecting voluntary and community sector organisations, and volunteers in particular to fill the gaps.
- A much higher cost of living than three years ago, for both volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations (including Volunteer Now).
- The absence of the NI Assembly and Executive for two years resulted in a public policy vacuum. The return of the NI Assembly and Executive provides an opportunity for Volunteer Now to have a voice in public policy development.
- Global Climate Change and the societal impacts of moving to a low carbon economy.
 Volunteering can be part of the solution in supporting biodiversity conservation, promoting environmental wellbeing and helping to reduce climate anxiety.
- Rapid developments in digital technologies, bringing both opportunities in increasing accessibility and widening the ways Volunteer Now can communicate and risks in relation to issues such as AI and cyber security.



STRATEGIC PLANNING

The strategic planning process involved an extensive two-stage consultation process, through workshops and interviews, with both external and internal stakeholders who are vital to the effective implementation of the plan.

The delivery of the plan will be guided by a theory of change and the development and monitoring of annual operational plans with SMART indicators.

VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

Our Vision (our final outcome - what we want to achieve)
A vibrant, fair and safe society where volunteering and volunteers flourish.

Our Mission (Our role in working towards the vision)

To be a powerful catalyst for volunteering to enrich lives and energise communities.

Values (the culture of the organisation – how we will work)

The following values, in addition to the 'Principles of volunteering' will underpin all aspects of Volunteer Now's work and culture:

Inclusion

Everyone is of equal worth and entitled to be treated with dignity and respect and included as a valued member of the community. We particularly value the potential of volunteers and their ideas, experiences and talents.

Integrity

Everyone should expect that Volunteer Now will do what it says it will and be open, honest and trustworthy.

Excellence

People participating in Volunteer Now's programmes are entitled to services that are of the highest standard and continuously improve through learning and innovation.

Collaboration

Much more is achieved when individuals and organisations work together collaboratively for mutual benefit.

Sustainability

It is important to always consider the long-term sustainability of the organisation's work, as well as of the environment.

CORE OUTCOMES (to achieve the mission)

Promoting Volunteering

Outcome 1: Everyone is aware of the opportunities and benefits of volunteering.

Building volunteering capacity

Outcome 2: Volunteer-involving organisations in Northern Ireland have all the skills, knowledge and support they need to ensure excellence in safeguarding, recruiting, training and engaging volunteers.

Advocating for volunteering

Outcome 3: Public policy and practice promotes and protects volunteering, through hearing the voice of volunteers and building the evidence-base about volunteering.



ENABLING outcomes (to ensure the organisation has the capacity to deliver the core outcomes)

Communications

Outcome 4: The organisation communicates effectively with volunteer- involving organisations, its stakeholders and the public.

Our people

Outcome 5: The organisation has the staff and volunteers it needs to achieve its aims and objectives and they are effectively supported and managed and given the opportunity to learn and develop.

Evidence based

Outcome 6: The organisation has the evidence-base to drive forward the mission and influence change.

Financial and physical resources

Outcome 7: The organisation generates sufficient net income to enable it to achieve its aims and objectives and resource planning, management and reporting to support effective decision-making.

Social Enterprise

Outcome 8: Volunteer Now optimises net income from its social enterprise work in support of its mission and values.

Governance

Outcome 9: The governance of the organisation complies with the law and all relevant requirements and role-models governance best practice.

CORE OUTCOMES AND PRIORITIES

1. Promoting Volunteering

Context

Volunteering takes place in almost all aspects of life. Wherever there is a need, there are people who are willing to give of their time and skills to help. Huge numbers of people have found it very beneficial to both receive the help of a volunteer and to be a volunteer. However, it is easy to take volunteering for granted. It needs to be effectively promoted in a co-ordinated way.

Volunteering is an important international phenomenon, making a contribution to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (see Appendix), so it is important that the voice of Northern Ireland is heard in regional, national and international forums and learning is shared. Particularly since Covid, the number of volunteers has declined, making the active promotion of volunteering even more important.

There are particular groups who are under-represented in the volunteering community, usually because they face significant barriers to becoming a volunteer. These groups include people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and people with disabilities. Volunteer Now, therefore, has a particularly important role in promoting volunteering to these groups and communities.



Outcome 1: Everyone is aware of the opportunities and benefits of volunteering.

Priorities for the period of the strategic plan:

- Increase the awareness of the value of volunteering amongst the public and all sectors through a range of methods
- Promote an early understanding and appreciation of volunteering amongst children, young people and families
- Encourage inclusivity in volunteering
- Lead on organising and promoting volunteering through Volunteers' Week and other events
- Collaborate with other relevant voluntary and community sector infrastructure bodies, volunteer centres in Northern Ireland, and UK, Ireland and international networks and infrastructure organisations

2. Building volunteering capacity

Context

As well as informal volunteering - helping friends and family - most effective volunteering requires the support of volunteer-involving organisations. There are already over 700 organisations involving volunteers who use Volunteer Now's services in promoting their vacant volunteer roles through a variety of methods including on the 'Be Collective' digital platform. Volunteer Now provides opportunities for people who want to volunteer to learn about and access volunteering opportunities that they feel are appropriate for them.

These volunteer-involving organisations are critical in ensuring successful volunteering. But like anything else, managing the volunteer process from beginning to end, involves a skill set that needs to be learnt. Volunteer Now provides high quality information and training to improve volunteering practices, and helps organisations use quality standards to build their capacity and skills of volunteer-involving groups and organisations.

Volunteer now also works with partners to directly deliver volunteer programmes and is committed to consistently role-modelling best practice.

In order to keep children and adults safe, Volunteer Now has been providing information, training and support on all aspects of safeguarding to volunteer involving organisations through the Our Duty to Care project since 1996.

Outcome 2: Volunteer-involving organisations in Northern Ireland have all the skills, knowledge and support they need to ensure excellence in safeguarding, recruiting, training and engaging volunteers.

- Regularly review the structure and specific benefits of Volunteer Now membership
- Promote high standards of inclusive volunteer management and engagement and provide appropriate volunteer management training including the use of digital tools



- Provide appropriate free up-to-date information for volunteer-involving organisations, volunteers and potential volunteers on volunteer involvement, safeguarding and governance
- Facilitate the networking of those involved in involving volunteers
- Promote good practice in governance for voluntary trustees/committee members of volunteer-involving organisations
- Support & co-ordinate networking for organisations involving volunteers in befriending
- Encourage and support employers to provide opportunities for employer -led volunteering
- Maintain the 'Be Collective' online volunteering platform and inform its development and maximise its use, accessibility and effectiveness
- Support volunteer-involving organisations to recruit and recognise volunteers
- Benchmark and promote best practice in safeguarding
- Effectively and efficiently facilitate Access NI checks
- Provide high-quality training on current safeguarding requirements and procedures for volunteer-involving organisations

3. Advocating for volunteering

Context

Volunteer Now plays a key role in advocating for volunteering in the public arena through amplifying the voices of members and volunteers. It recognises that this will be a key feature of the work of the organisation in the next five years.

Volunteer Now recognises that it can often have more impact through influencing the policies, plans and practices of the NI Executive, government departments, armslength statutory bodies and local authorities than through the delivery of services. With the return of the NI Assembly and Executive, there is much more potential to have a voice at a Northern Ireland-wide level. As well as being clear about its public policy objectives, this work requires the persistent building of appropriate relationships, the building of the evidence-base and a movement of other organisations, and campaigning and lobbying in an effective and appropriate.

Volunteer Now acknowledges that it has a responsibility to amplify the voices of volunteers and the organisations they work with through utilising research data to influence the policies, plans and practices of the NI Executive, government departments, arms-length statutory bodies and local authorities. It is important to build key relationships and ensure that volunteering is a priority for government.

Outcome 3: Public policy and practice promote and protect volunteering, through hearing the voice of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations.

- Enable the voices of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations to influence the development of evidence-based public policy
- Work with other partners, networks and coalitions to increase the effectiveness of a collective voice for volunteering
- Advocate for effective resourcing of volunteering, better understanding of the real costs of volunteering



- Develop effective relationships with public policy decision-makers, and influencers
- Be a strong advocate for volunteering on relevant Northern Ireland bodies and networks

CORE OUTCOMES AND PRIORITIES

4. Communications

Context

Volunteer Now recognises that effective communications underpin the successful achievement of nearly all its aims and priorities and although the organisation has a website and produces regular newsletters for volunteer-involving organisations, it also recognises that communications is an area that has been under-resourced in recent years and needs to be developed to expand and deepen its reach.

Outcome 4: The organisation communicates effectively with volunteer-involving organisations, its stakeholders and the public.

Priorities for the period of the strategic plan:

- Ensure Volunteer Now has an appropriate brand and sub-brands and these are effectively promoted and protected
- Develop, implement and review effective marketing, PR and communication strategies to increase awareness of Volunteer Now and volunteering
- Effectively tell the story of volunteering
- Increase the awareness of Volunteer Now amongst the public
- Effectively market Volunteer Now programmes, training and consultancy services
- Ensure effective regular communication with Volunteer Now's members and external stakeholders, and other volunteer-involving organisations
- Expand the reach and effectiveness of the organisation's website and social media platforms

5. People

Context

Volunteer Now benefits from the skills, enthusiasm and commitment of over 700 volunteers. The organisation has 33 staff who are either home-based or working hybrid from one of the Volunteer Now offices in Belfast, Newry, or Enniskillen.

Volunteer Now recognises the critical importance of maintaining a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce which is effectively managed and supported and given the opportunity to grow, develop and have a voice.

Outcome 5: The organisation has the staff and volunteers it needs to achieve its aims and objectives and they are effectively supported and managed and given the opportunity to learn and develop.



Priorities for the period of the strategic plan:

- Recruit a sufficient number of appropriate volunteers for Volunteer Now projects and ensure they are effectively inducted, managed, supported, given the opportunity to develop and have a voice in decisions that may affect them
- Ensure the organisation has the workforce structure and supportive culture it requires to achieve its aims and objectives
- Ensure the organisation has appropriate terms and conditions and up-to-date human resource policies and procedures to attract and retain staff
- Ensure staff are effectively managed, supported, involved and their performance reviewed
- Promote effective teamwork, internal communication and team and individual reflection and learning
- Provide effective resources for staff and volunteer health and wellbeing

6. Be evidence-based

Context

Like most organisations, Volunteer Now has evaluated its work and measured the impact of aspects of its work when the resources have been available. However, Volunteer Now recognises the importance of becoming a data-driven organisation which understands the impact of its work, the benefits realised which therefore can efficiently use its resources to maximise the difference it makes and the value it delivers.

This will require focus and investment over the period of this strategic plan to ensure that the processes for collecting and analysing data are in place to properly operationalise the theory of change.

Volunteer Now has a positive track record in commissioning and disseminating research into volunteering in Northern Ireland. However, it recognises that, with the appropriate resources and partnerships, it could develop a more strategic approach to both commissioning its own research and utilising the international research literature to demonstrate the impact of volunteering.

Outcome 6: The organisation has the evidence-base to drive forward the mission and influence change.

- Use the evidence base to set the agenda for conversations with key stakeholders on the value and impact of volunteering in Northern Ireland.
- Work with others to track changes in the nature of, and barriers to, volunteering in Northern Ireland
- Track the international academic literature on volunteering and disseminate relevant findings
- Develop effective relationships with appropriate organisations and universities engaged in research
- Develop, implement and regularly review and improve an impact framework and reporting structure in line with the theory of change.
- Develop the digital and other mechanisms to collect and analyse the outputs of the organisation's work



- Explore the cost-benefit of volunteering
- Support volunteer-involving organisations to demonstrate their quantitative and qualitative impact

7. Financial and physical resources

Context

Volunteer Now recognises the importance of planning and managing its financial resources to the highest standards, promoting efficiency, protecting the organisation from theft and fraud and maintaining an appropriate reserves policy.

Most of Volunteer Now's income comes from statutory sources, charitable trusts and foundations. There is the potential for development in generating additional income from individual, chartable and corporate sources, as well as increasing its net income from social enterprise activities.

The organisation operates from three rented premises in Belfast, Newry and Enniskillen and, as of 2024 is seeking new premises in Bangor/Ards.

Outcome 7: The organisation generates sufficient net income to enable it to achieve its aims and objectives, and resource planning, management and reporting to support effective decision-making.

Priorities for the period of the strategic plan:

- Ensure the organisation has the premises and other physical resources it requires to achieve its aims and objectives, and these resources are appropriately managed
- Effectively budget for revenue and capital expenditure, forecast cash-flow, and regularly review variance against budget to ensure the organisation remains solvent
- Ensure the organisation has sufficient reserves to ensure its financial sustainability which are invested and managed effectively.
- Ensure the financial systems and procedures promote efficiency and good decision-making and protect the organisation from theft and fraud
- Maximise full-cost-recovery funding from statutory sources and ensure compliance with funder requirements
- Maximise appropriate net income from individual, charitable and corporate sources
- Identify, tender for, and deliver relevant bids for full-cost recovery work which furthers the core objectives of Volunteer Now

8. Social Enterprise

Context

It seems likely that over the next five years the amount of funding that Volunteer Now will receive from statutory sources will, at best, not increase, so the value of this funding will decrease with inflation. This means that to be sustainable and maintain its free and low-cost services to these organisations Volunteer Now will need to increase its net income from various sources including its consultancy and training services through Volunteer Now Enterprises.



Volunteer Now Enterprises already generates net income of around £100,000 each year from paid training and safeguarding work, which helps subsidise the extensive portfolio of free or low-cost training and publications the charity provides.

Volunteer Now Enterprises needs to continue to enhance the reputation of the charity and keep pace with digital developments. It needs to expand its social enterprise work in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, but also elsewhere in the UK, Ireland, internationally and to other sectors in Northern Ireland.

Outcome 8: Volunteer Now optimises net income from its social enterprise work in support of its mission and values.

Priorities for the period of the strategic plan:

- Ensure Volunteer Now's social enterprise work has an appropriate brand (and sub-brands) which are effectively promoted and protected and contribute to the reputation of the charity.
- Regularly analyse and prioritise income-generating opportunities for social enterprise growth and development in safeguarding, training, consultancy, and governance services
- Build portfolio of relevant social enterprise consultancy and training services, both digital and in person, which can generate increased net income for the charity
- Expand the market for Volunteer Now Enterprise's income-generating services outside of Northern Ireland
- Expand the market for Volunteer Now Enterprise's income-generating services in the private and public sectors
- Build the pool of Volunteer Now associates who can deliver social economy training and consultancy both in person and online.
- Effectively market Volunteer Now's social economy offer

9. Governance

Context

Volunteer Now is a charitable company limited by guarantee. As a company, the board members are directors; as a charity, the board members are trustees. They, therefore, need to comply with both charity law and company law. The charity also has a subsidiary non-profit company limited by guarantee, Volunteer Now Enterprises, which is not a charity and is responsible for the organisation's trading activities. Profits from the subsidiary are transferred to support the charity's work.

Volunteer Now provides the secretariat to the Developing Governance Group made up of various voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations, and which has developed and updated the Code of Good Governance. Volunteer Now therefore recognises the importance of, as well as complying fully with all its legal responsibilities, role-modelling best governance practice.

Outcome 9: The governance of the organisation complies with the law and all relevant requirements and role-models governance best practice.



- Ensure the board of Volunteer Now has the skills, knowledge, balance and structure to govern effectively and ethically
- Plan the succession of board trustees/directors, office-bearers and leadership roles
- Effectively create the culture in Volunteer Now to be an employer of choice
- Effectively manage and support the CEO
- Effectively manage risk and ensure the organisation complies with the organisation's legal responsibilities and has the appropriate organisational policies and procedures
- Ensure there are current strategic and operational plans leading to measurable indicators and outcomes, progress against which is effectively monitored within a culture of supportive accountability
- Regularly review the governance of the organisation



APPENDIX

Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
Goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

